

RT, Sputnik and Russia's New Theory of War

How the Kremlin built one of the most powerful information weapons of the 21st century — and why it may be impossible to stop.

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One morning in January 2016, Martin Steltner showed up at his office in the state courthouse building in western Berlin. Steltner, who has served for more than a dozen years as the spokesman for the Berlin state prosecutor, resembles a detective out of classic crime fiction: crisp suit, wavy gray hair and a gallows humor that comes with having seen it all. There was the 2009 case of the therapist who mistakenly killed two patients in an Ecstasy-infused session gone wrong. The Great Poker Heist of 2010, in which masked men stormed a celebrity-studded poker tournament with machetes and made off with a quarter-million dollars. The 2012 episode involving the Canadian porn star who killed and ate his boyfriend and then sent the leftovers home in the mail. Steltner embraced the oddball aspect of his job; he kept a picture of Elvis Presley on the wall of his office.

But even Steltner found the phone calls he received that morning confounding. They came from police officers from towns far outside Berlin, who reported that protests were erupting, seemingly out of nowhere, on their streets. “They are demonstrating — ‘Save our children,’ ‘No attacks from immigrants on our children’ and some things like that,” Steltner told me when I met him in Berlin recently.

The police were calling Steltner because this was ostensibly his office’s fault. The protesters were angry over the Berlin prosecutor’s supposed refusal to indict three Arab migrants who, they said, raped a 13-year-old girl from Berlin’s tight-knit Russian-German community.

Steltner, who would certainly have been informed if such a case had come up for prosecution, had heard nothing of it. He called the Berlin Police Department, which informed him that a 13-year-old Russian-German girl had indeed gone missing a week before. When she resurfaced a day later, she told her parents that three “Southern-looking men” — by which she meant Arab migrants — had yanked her off the street and taken her to a rundown apartment, where they beat and raped her.

But when the police interviewed the girl, whose name was Lisa, she changed her story. She had left home, it turned out, because she had gotten in trouble at school. Afraid of how her parents would react, she went to stay with a 19-year-old male friend. The kidnapping and gang rape, she admitted, never happened.

By then, however, the girl’s initial story was taking on a life of its own within the Russian-German community through word of mouth and Facebook — enough so that the police felt compelled to put out a statement debunking it. Then, over the weekend, Channel One, a Russian state-controlled news station with a large following among Russian-Germans, who watch it on YouTube and its website, ran a report presenting Lisa’s story as an example of the unchecked dangers Middle Eastern refugees posed to German citizens. Angela Merkel, it strongly implied, was refusing to address these threats, even as she opened German borders to hundreds of thousands of migrants. “According to Lisa’s parents,” the Channel One reporter said, “the police simply refuse to look for criminals.”

The following day in Berlin, Germany’s far-right National Democratic Party held a protest at a plaza in Marzahn, a heavily Russian neighborhood. The featured

speaker was an adult cousin of Lisa's, who repeated the original allegations while standing in front of signs reading "Stop Foreign Infiltration!" and "Secure Borders!" The crowd was tiny, not much more than a dozen people. But it was big enough to attract the attention of RT, Russia's state-financed international cable network, which presents local-language newscasts in numerous countries, including Germany and the United States. A crew from the network's video service, Ruptly, arrived with a camera. The footage was on YouTube that afternoon.

That same day, Sputnik, a brash Russian-government-run news and commentary site that models itself on BuzzFeed, ran a story raising allegations of a police cover-up. Lisa's case was not isolated, Sputnik argued; other refugee rapists, it warned, might be running free. By the start of the following week, protests were breaking out in neighborhoods with large Russian-German populations, which is why the local police were calling Steltner. In multiple interviews, including with RT and Sputnik, Steltner reiterated that the girl had recanted the original story about the kidnapping and the gang rape. In one interview with the German media, he said that in the course of the investigation, authorities had found evidence that the girl had sex with a 23-year-old man months earlier, which would later lead to a sexual-abuse conviction for the man, whose sentence was suspended. But the original, unrelated and debunked story continued circulating, drawing the interest of the German mainstream media, which pointed out inconsistencies in the Russian reports. None of that stopped the protests, which culminated in a demonstration the following Saturday, Jan. 23, by 700 people outside the Chancellery, Merkel's office. Ruptly covered that, too.

An official in the Merkel government told me that the administration was completely perplexed, at first. Then, a few days later, Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, held a news conference in Moscow. Bringing up Lisa's story, he cast doubt on the official version of events. There was no way, he argued, that Lisa left home voluntarily. Germany, he suggested, was "covering up reality in a politically correct manner for the sake of domestic politics." Two days later, RT ran a segment reporting that despite all the official denials, the case was "not so simple." The Russian Embassy called Steltner and asked to meet, he told me. The German foreign ministry informed him that this was now a diplomatic issue.

The whole affair suddenly appeared a lot less mystifying. A realization took hold in the foreign ministry, the intelligence services and the Chancellery: Germany had been hit.

Officials in Germany and at NATO headquarters in Brussels view the Lisa case, as it is now known, as an early strike in a new information war Russia is waging against the West. In the months that followed, politicians perceived by the Russian government as hostile to its interests would find themselves caught up in media storms that, in their broad contours, resembled the one that gathered around Merkel. They often involved conspiracy theories and outright falsehoods — sometimes with a tenuous connection to fact, as in the Lisa case, sometimes with no connection at all — amplified until they broke through into domestic politics. In other cases, they simply helped promote nationalist, far-left or far-right views that put pressure on the political center. What the efforts had in common was their agents: a loose network of Russian-government-run or -financed media outlets and apparently coordinated social-media accounts.

After RT and Sputnik gave platforms to politicians behind the British vote to leave the European Union, like Nigel Farage, a committee of the British Parliament released a report warning that foreign governments may have tried to interfere with the referendum. Russia and China, the report argued, had an “understanding of mass psychology and of how to exploit individuals” and practiced a kind of cyberwarfare “reaching beyond the digital to influence public opinion.” When President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia visited the new French president, Emmanuel Macron, at the palace of Versailles in May, Macron spoke out about such influence campaigns at a news conference. Having prevailed weeks earlier in the election over Marine Le Pen — a far-right politician who had backed Putin’s annexation of Crimea and met with him in the Kremlin a month before the election — Macron complained that “Russia Today and Sputnik were agents of influence which on several occasions spread fake news about me personally and my campaign.”

But all of this paled in comparison with the role that Russian information networks are suspected to have played in the American presidential election of 2016. In early January, two weeks before Donald J. Trump took office, American intelligence officials released a declassified version of a report — prepared jointly by the Central

Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and National Security Agency — titled “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections.” It detailed what an Obama-era Pentagon intelligence official, Michael Vickers, described in an interview in June with NBC News as “the political equivalent of 9/11.” “Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election,” the authors wrote. “Russia’s goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton and harm her electability and potential presidency.” According to the report, “Putin and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.”

The intelligence assessment detailed some cloak-and-dagger activities, like the murky web of Russian (if not directly government-affiliated or -financed) hackers who infiltrated voting systems and stole gigabytes’ worth of email and other documents from the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign. But most of the assessment concerned machinations that were plainly visible to anyone with a cable subscription or an internet connection: the coordinated activities of the TV and online-media properties and social-media accounts that made up, in the report’s words, “Russia’s state-run propaganda machine.”

The assessment devoted nearly half its pages to a single cable network: RT. The Kremlin started RT — shortened from the original Russia Today — a dozen years ago to improve Russia’s image abroad. It operates in several world capitals and is carried on cable and satellite networks across the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. RT and the rest of the Russian information machine were working with “covert intelligence operations” to do no less than “undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order,” the assessment stated. And, it warned ominously, “Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the U.S. presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against U.S. allies and their election processes.” On Sept. 11, RT announced that the Justice Department had asked a company providing all production and operations services for RT America in the United States to register as a “foreign agent” under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, a World War II-era law that was originally devised for Nazi propaganda. Also on Sept. 11, Yahoo News reported that a former correspondent at Sputnik was speaking with the F.B.I. as part of an investigation

into whether it was violating FARA.

Russia has dismissed the intelligence-community claims as so much Cold War-era Yankee hysteria. Margarita Simonyan, RT's chief editor, told me the allegations against the network smacked of "McCarthyism." Still, Russian officials are remarkably open about the aims of RT and Sputnik: to "break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon global information streams," as Putin himself put it during a visit to RT's Moscow headquarters in 2013. Russia's argument about RT's rightful place in the American media landscape is not all that different from the one Roger Ailes made when he started Fox News: If you thought Fox looked conservative, he would say, maybe it's because you were liberal. In Russia's case, it's: If RT looks biased, it's because you live in a bubble of Western arrogance and hypocrisy. *You're the one who's biased.*

Plenty of RT's programming, to outward appearances, is not qualitatively different from conventional opinion-infused cable news. RT America's current roster of hosts includes the former New York Times correspondent Chris Hedges, Larry King and the former MSNBC star Ed Schultz, who told me that the network allows him to cover news that may not otherwise "get the proper attention that we think it deserves." (And, he added, "the health care is outstanding.") Its fans point to its coverage of political perspectives that aren't prominent on mainstream networks — voices from the Occupy movement, the libertarian right and third parties like the Green Party. The network has been nominated for four International Emmy Awards and one Daytime Emmy.

This makes RT and Sputnik harder for the West to combat than shadowy hackers. You can tighten your internet security protocols to protect against data breaches, run counterhacking operations to take out infiltrators, sanction countries with proven links to such activities. But RT and Sputnik operate on the stated terms of Western liberal democracy; they count themselves as news organizations, protected by the First Amendment and the libertarian ethos of the internet.

So over the past decade, even as the Putin government clamped down on its own free press — and as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, the U.S.-government-run broadcasting services, were largely squeezed off the Russian radio dial — RT

easily acquired positions on the basic cable rosters of Comcast, Cox, Charter, DirecTV and Fios, among others. The network's offshoots — RT UK, RT Arabic, RT Deutsch, RT Español — operate just as freely in other countries (though British regulators have reprimanded RT UK for content "materially misleading or not duly impartial"). Macron might have grumbled about RT to Putin, but France is not standing in the way of RT's plans to start a new French channel.

By standard media-industry metrics, RT is relatively small. Numbers that RT commissioned in 2015 from the polling firm Ipsos showed it was watched, weekly, by eight million people in the United States, placing it among the top five foreign networks here and in Europe. (Ipsos also found RT was watched by 70 million per week globally; the BBC, using a different polling firm, says its own audience is 372 million per week.) But American television measures itself by the Nielsen ratings, which RT doesn't pay to be measured by. Nielsen shows Fox News with an average audience of 2.3 million people nightly, MSNBC with 1.6 million nightly and CNN with more than one million nightly. It's a good bet that if RT thought it would rank anywhere near them, it would pay to be rated.

But the ratings are almost beside the point. RT might not have amassed an audience that remotely rivals CNN's in conventional terms, but in the new, "democratized" media landscape, it doesn't need to. Over the past several years, the network has come to form the hub of a new kind of state media operation: one that travels through the same diffuse online channels, chasing the same viral hits and memes, as the rest of the Twitter-and-Facebook-age media. In the process, Russia has built the most effective propaganda operation of the 21st century so far, one that thrives in the feverish political climates that have descended on many Western publics.

In April, I went to visit Dmitri Peskov, Putin's press secretary, at his Kremlin office. Peskov, who is 49, works in the presidential administrative headquarters, a prewar building with a grand facade but cramped hallways and offices inside. He has been a spokesman for Putin since Putin first took office in 2000 and is almost always hovering on the edge of the frame in Putin's photo ops, whether it's at a gathering of international heads of state or as the president is positioning his pads for a star turn in an exhibition hockey game. The whole presidential-press-attaché-as-celebrity

thing is finally starting to hit Russia — Peskov's lavish wedding to a former Russian Olympic ice-dancing gold medalist in 2015 made the tabloids — but his work look is more Politburo than Paul Smith. He has bushy reddish-brown hair and a mustache, and always appears to be suppressing a sly smile, even when he is frowning.

When I asked Peskov what Putin meant by RT's mission to "break the monopoly of Anglo-Saxon global information streams," he went into something of a dissertation, speaking in English with obvious relish and little room for interjections. "The whole trend of global media was set by Anglo-Saxons," he began. "It's like the first conveyor belt. It was created by Mr. Ford in the United States." (It wasn't, but Ford was the first major manufacturer to use the technology on a grand scale.) But now, he went on, "the conveyor line is not only working in G.M., in Ford — it's also working in Citroën, in Renault, in Mercedes-Benz, in Toyota, everywhere in the world."

Something like the dissemination of Ford's conveyor belt, he said, was now happening in media; the sort of global news networks the West built were being replicated by Russia, to great effect. What was making "the whole story successful," he said, "is a tectonic change of the global system that all of a sudden started to develop 10 years ago."

The transformation and acceleration of information technology, Peskov said, had unmoored the global economy from real value. Perception alone could move markets or crash them. "We've never seen bubbles like we've seen in the greatest economy in the world, the United States," he said. The same free flow of information had produced "a new clash of interests," and so began "an informational disaster — an informational war."

Peskov argued that this was not an information war of Russia's choosing; it was a "counteraction." He brought up the "color revolutions" throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which led to the ousters of Russian-friendly governments in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in the mid-2000s. Russia blamed American nongovernmental organizations for fomenting the upheavals. But now, Peskov argued, all you might need to shake up the geopolitical order was a Twitter account. "Now you can reach hundreds of millions in a minute," he said.

By way of example, he pointed to “this girl, from show business, Kim Kardashian.” Kardashian is among the most popular people in all of social media, with 55 million Twitter followers, nearly 18 million more than President Trump. “Let’s imagine that one day she says, ‘My supporters — do this,’ ” Peskov said. “This will be a signal that will be accepted by millions and millions of people. And she’s got no intelligence, no interior ministry, no defense ministry, no K.G.B.” This, he said, was the new reality: the global proliferation of the kinds of reach and influence that were once reserved for the great powers and, more recently, great media conglomerates. Even Peskov sounded slightly amazed considering the possibilities. “The new reality creates a perfect opportunity for mass disturbances,” he said, “or for initiating mass support or mass disapproval.”

One way of looking at the activities of Russia’s information machine is as a resumption of the propaganda fight between the United States and the U.S.S.R. that began immediately following the Second World War. In the late 1940s, the Marshall Plan, the herculean development project helmed by Secretary of State George Marshall, flooded postwar Europe with money and advisers to help rebuild cities, advance democracy and form an integrated economic zone. Joseph Stalin immediately saw it as a threat — and saw propaganda as one of his best weapons to contain it.

In 1947, Stalin formed the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), a Belgrade-headquartered forum to coordinate messaging among European Communist parties. Cominform used Communist newspapers, pamphlets and posters to paint the Marshall Plan as an American plot to subjugate Europe. A representative Soviet poster distributed in Vienna showed an American — identified by American-flag shirt cuffs — offering aid packages with one hand while plundering Austria’s gold with the other. Radio Moscow — the state-run international broadcaster — and Soviet-supported newspapers throughout Europe accused the “imperialist” United States of pursuing a plan of “dollar domination” to make the Continent dependent on American goods and services, and of conscripting local youth to fight American proxy wars elsewhere.

Writing in The New York Times that year, the correspondent Anne O’Hare McCormick recounted false reports in the Red Army newspaper in Vienna that the

locals were afraid to walk the streets at night lest American soldiers rob and mug them — propaganda, she wrote, that “may not convince, but it adds to the confusion between truth and falsehood and fosters that darkness of the mind in which dictatorships operate.” In a 1947 letter to George Marshall’s undersecretary, Robert A. Lovett, William C. Chanler, a wartime Defense Department official, urged a response, warning that “we are making the same mistake that was made with Hitler.”

For the counterinformation campaign, the U.S. government enlisted journalists, including the Washington Post Pulitzer winner Alfred Friendly and the Christian Science Monitor’s Roscoe Drummond; Hollywood filmmakers; and the top marketers of Madison Avenue, including McCann-Erickson and Young and Rubicam. The new effort — which eventually fell under a new United States Information Agency — produced upbeat posters with slogans like “Whatever the weather, we only reach welfare together,” which offered a bright contrast to the Communists’ anti-Marshall Plan messaging. Operating on the theory that local voices would have more credibility than American ones, it fed news to foreign reporters about how well the Marshall Plan was progressing in their countries and recruited top European directors to produce hundreds of news features and documentaries that promoted “Western values” like free trade and representative democracy.

America went into the propaganda war with distinct advantages. At the time, the Marshall Plan was pumping \$13 billion into Europe, while the Soviets were taking \$14 billion out in the form of reparations and resource seizures; America’s image abroad was as squeaky clean as it would ever be. “This was the time when finally the United States came of age as an international power — when it still had its virginity, as it were,” David Reynolds, a Cambridge University history professor, told me.

America’s midcentury propaganda success set the tone for the decades to come. It was not entirely a matter of America’s having a better story to tell, and savvier storytellers, than the Soviet Union did. Soviet propaganda did, in fact, work on the people it reached. A controlled study conducted by a professor at Florida State University in 1970 found that Americans who listened to Radio Moscow broadcasts developed more open attitudes toward the U.S.S.R. than those of average Americans.

The problem was that very few Americans *did* hear Radio Moscow: It was available only on shortwave radio and on a handful of American stations — including WNYC in New York — reaching less than 2 percent of the adult population in the United States as of late 1966. Meanwhile, Voice of America, the United States' equivalent service offering a mix of news, music and entertainment, was reaching 23 percent of the Soviet adult population by the early 1970s. Later studies found that up to 40 percent of the Soviet Union's adult population listened to “Western broadcasting” of one sort or another, in spite of aggressive Soviet signal-jamming efforts.

And unlike the Soviets, the United States benefited from the existence of a vast ecosystem of nongovernment media that, even when it crossed swords with the American government, still reflected an American outlook and implicitly promoted American cultural values. The first international, 24-hour networks to come online in the 1980s, like CNN, were American, and they provided their audience — which eventually included many behind the Iron Curtain — an unsparing view of the last days of Communism: student protesters staring down tanks in Tiananmen Square, protests and strikes in Poland, East Germans exulting on the ruins of the Berlin Wall. When Mikhail Gorbachev signed his resignation, ceding power to the new presidency of Boris Yeltsin in the last official act of Soviet Communism, he invited CNN to capture the moment in his Kremlin office suite. Finding his own pen out of ink, Gorbachev turned to the CNN president at the time, Tom Johnson, who lent Gorbachev the Mont Blanc he had in his breast pocket. After making sure the pen wasn’t American-made, the last Soviet leader used it to sign one of the most important documents in Russian history. “You have built your empire better than I built mine,” he told Johnson.

Mikhail Lesin, too, wanted to build an empire. Around the time of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, he was in his mid-30s, running Video International, an early big Russian ad firm, of which he was a founder. Video International was credited with bringing modern, American-style techniques to Yeltsin’s 1996 re-election campaign, and after Yeltsin’s victory, the president rewarded Lesin by placing him in charge of his presidential communications operation.

Lesin was a sharp-witted hard drinker who was concerned about Russia’s image in the world. He had a vision for an international network that would familiarize

Russia in the same way that CNN familiarized America. But the chaos of the later Yeltsin years, in which the ruble collapsed and Yeltsin's government foundered, made such a thing impossible.

Lesin found a more receptive patron in Putin, who succeeded Yeltsin in 1999. Putin — who, as a deputy in the St. Petersburg mayor's office half a decade earlier, once chauffeured Ted Turner around the city — was an attentive student of the power of television. At times, he could not contain his frustration with the way the foreign media covered Russia. "All they can talk about is crisis and breakdown," he complained to a nationalist youth group in 2005.

That year, with the Russian economy rebounding thanks to strong oil prices, Lesin and Alexei Gromov, Putin's press strategist, secured the approval and financing to start the network, which they called Russia Today. To run the new operation, they hired a 25-year-old TV reporter named Margarita Simonyan.

When she heard she got the job, "I almost fainted," Simonyan told me recently. We were sitting on plush couches on an exclusive, dimly lit floor of Voronezh, a fashionable restaurant in the Khamovniki district in central Moscow. "Dr. No," the James Bond film about a plan to disrupt the American space program, was on a TV screen opposite us. Before us was a spread of venison, oysters and shrimp, themselves an unsubtle statement: They were imported from Russia's far east, a menu adjustment in response to the sanctions and countersanctions that had cut off Western food imports.

Simonyan, who is now 37, is petite with a wide face, dark hair and green eyes. Her name appears more times in the declassified U.S. intelligence assessment than anyone's besides Putin's, but she seems a somewhat unlikely candidate for an American national-security threat. When the report dropped, she wrote on Twitter: "They are kidding, right?" At the restaurant, she told me: "I never planned to be a part of a weapon. I have two children, and I'm very, very peaceful. I don't like wars. Any wars."

Simonyan grew up poor in Krasnodar, a southern Russia river town, and was 11 when the Soviet Union collapsed. "We adored the fact that we are now going to be like America and taught like America and to be even patronized by America and be

America's little brother," she told me. "It didn't feel in any way humiliating or contradictory to the Russian pride." Her infatuation with the United States led her to apply for a slot in a new State Department "future leaders" exchange program, which placed top students from the former Soviet Union in United States high schools to "ensure long-lasting peace and understanding between the U.S. and the countries of Eurasia."

For one academic year, she attended a public high school in Bristol, N.H. "She was fascinated with news," Patricia Albert, whose parents hosted Simonyan, and who remains close with her, told me. "Maggie," as the family still calls her, would sit transfixed every night when she joined them on the couch to watch the local news, "60 Minutes" and "CBS Evening News With Dan Rather." But she also came to resent some of her American classmates for what she viewed as their sheltered naïveté. "'Do you have dogs?' I remember that," she told me. "I still have a letter I wrote to my parents saying, 'I can't believe they are seriously asking me whether we have dogs.' They were grown-ups — 18-year-olds — in a normal high school in New Hampshire, which is supposed to be a sophisticated place."

Back home in Krasnodar, her view of the United States, like many Russians', started to curdle after the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia, with which Russia had strong ethnic, cultural and political ties: "Our Slavic brothers and sisters," she told me, leaning forward for emphasis. "You bombed them with no permission, with no reason," she said, "and in one day you lost Russia."

As a journalism major at Kuban State University, Simonyan landed an internship and, quickly thereafter, a correspondent position at a local TV station. Her patriotism and feel for the American-style production techniques she had seen on TV in New Hampshire — which had not yet come to Russia — helped her rise quickly through the ranks of state journalism. She covered the brutal Chechen military campaign in 1999 and 2000 that helped solidify Putin's political standing as he ascended to the presidency, and the 2004 Beslan school siege, which earned her the government's "Strengthening the Military Commonwealth" medal.

When she took the helm of Russia Today the following year, Simonyan modeled

the new network on CNN and the BBC, and she hired TV consultants from Britain to help give Russia Today a modern cable-news look and feel. (The RT studios in Moscow, when I visited them this spring, were as state-of-the-art as any I'd seen in the United States.) "Nobody in Russia had experience of that kind," Simonyan told me. "Twenty-four-hour news had not been established yet." One of her employees, Andrey Kiyashko, who started at RT in his late teens, told me: "CNN, BBC — we were watching it and taking notes on how to be broadcast journalists."

At the beginning, the network's mission was to reverse the global view of Russians "as bears that roam the streets and growl," as Lesin put it in an interview in 2001. (Lesin was found dead in a Washington hotel room in 2015. The city's medical examiner attributed his death to blunt trauma to the head. While the incident remains the subject of much speculation, federal investigators have said they believe Lesin's death followed a prolonged bout of heavy drinking.) An early BBC content analysis found nothing all that remarkable in the network's Russia-centric coverage and noted that it even included criticism of the Russian bureaucracy.

Russia Today — incorporated as an independent company with state financing — was getting into hotels and even American cable systems. But three years into its existence, the network still had not gained much notice or had much discernible impact abroad. Simonyan says she concluded that the network's mission of solely focusing on Russia needed revising. "We had basically too much Russian news," she told me.

So in 2008, Russia Today began to reposition itself. The network was reintroduced with a new name, RT, and hired McCann — the same American advertising firm that once helped the United States sell the Marshall Plan. It soon debuted a new satellite channel in the United States, RT America. Instead of celebrating Russia, Simonyan's network would turn a critical eye to the rest of the world, particularly the United States. As Peskov sees it, the idea was: "Why are you criticizing us in Chechnya and all this stuff? Look at what you are doing there in the United States with your relationship with white and black." He went on: "RT said: 'Stop. Don't criticize us. We'll tell you about yourself.' "

With that, he said, "all of the sudden, Anglo-Saxons saw that there is an army

from the opposite side.” RT’s new slogan, dreamed up by McCann, was “Question More.”

RT America set up shop in a glass-fronted office building in Washington a block and a half east of the White House. The new network promised to feature stories that “have not been reported” or were “hugely underreported” in the mainstream media, Simonyan told The Times in 2010. In line with the Marshall Plan dictum that natives have more credibility than foreigners, it was staffed by American hosts: an incongruous mix of telegenic, ambitious but inexperienced broadcast journalists like Liz Wahl, whom RT recruited from the local television station in the Mariana Islands, and later-career itinerant expats like Peter Lavelle, a banker-turned-reporter who previously worked as a stringer for United Press International’s Moscow bureau and contributed to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

From early on, the channel’s interviews highlighted Sept. 11 “truthers,” who believed the Sept. 11 attacks were an inside job, including Alex Jones, whose segments, ranging freely across the broader spectrum of conspiracy theories — from Osama bin Laden’s staged death to the all-powerful machinations of the Bilderberg Group — became regular occurrences on the network. When I asked Simonyan about the Sept. 11 conspiracy theories, she replied: “Some guy in the states who worked for us — he doesn’t have that position anymore — was a bit into that. I didn’t pay any attention to that. When I did, I almost killed everybody.” But, she said, it went with the territory. “We do have our mistakes sometimes, like The New York Times does, like everything does,” she said. “We correct them.”

To the extent that RT had any clear ideological bent, it was a sort of all-purpose anti-establishment stance that drew from both the anti-globalization left (the network hosted a Green Party debate) and the libertarian right (it lavished attention on the Rand Paul movement). Its news coverage emphasized poverty and racial injustice, and it found its breakthrough story in the Occupy Wall Street protests. As Wahl, who quit RT in 2014, wrote later in Politico Magazine, “Video of outraged protesters, heavy-handed police and tents pitched in parks portrayed America as a country in the midst of a popular uprising — it was the beginning of the inevitable decline of a capitalistic world power.” The coverage, which earned RT one of its International Emmy nominations, brought the network into alignment with Julian

Assange, whom Simonyan brought on to host an interview show that ran for a dozen episodes in 2012.

At the time, state journalism back in Russia was enjoying a kind of renaissance under Dmitri Medvedev, who was elected president in 2008. (Russian presidents are limited to two consecutive terms; Putin endorsed Medvedev as his successor and served as his prime minister before returning to the presidency.) The main Russian international news service, RIA Novosti, hired journalists from The Moscow Times, Agence France-Presse and Reuters, following the philosophy that Russia served its interests best by providing traditional warts-and-all news, with a Russian voice and perspective. “There was no talk about censorship,” Nabi Abdullaev, a former Moscow Times deputy chief editor who oversaw RIA Novosti’s foreign-language news service, told me. “All they wanted from me was quality professional standards in reporting; that was it.”

But that all changed shortly after Putin’s presidential re-election in 2012. The following year, with no warning, Putin signed a decree effectively bringing together RIA Novosti and Voice of Russia, the broadcast service previously called Radio Moscow, under the umbrella of a new organization called Rossiya Segodnya. The Kremlin appointed as its manager Dmitry Kiselyov, state television’s most popular host, known for homophobic rants and his taste for conspiracy theories. Kiselyov went to greet the shocked staff a few days later, delivering a speech that one staff member surreptitiously recorded and posted to YouTube.

“Objectivity is a myth,” Kiselyov said. “Just imagine a young man who puts an arm around the shoulder of a girl,” he went on, “and tells the girl, ‘You know, I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time that I treat you objectively.’ Is this what she’s waiting for? Probably not. So in the same way, our country, Russia, needs our love. If we speak about the editorial policy, of course, I would certainly want it to be associated with love for Russia.” Journalism, he said, was an instrument of the country.

Three weeks later, Kiselyov announced that Margarita Simonyan would serve as the new organization’s editor in chief. Simonyan renamed RIA Novosti’s international branch Sputnik — “because I thought that’s the only Russian word that

has a positive connotation, and the whole world knows it,” she told me. Kiselyov presented it as a defensive weapon, saying it was for people “tired of aggressive propaganda promoting a unipolar world” from the West. Meanwhile, Simonyan made new plans for RT that included expansions in Britain and Germany. Together, RT and Sputnik would be the nucleus of an assertively pro-Russian, frequently anti-West information network, RT in the mold of a more traditional cable network and Sputnik as its more outspoken, flashy younger sibling.

At the time, Putin was angry about pro-democracy protests that had attended his re-election, which RIA Novosti had covered. But the Russian leadership was also thinking about information strategy in new ways. In early 2013, Valery Gerasimov, a top Russian general, published an article in a Russian military journal called VPK. Gerasimov had observed Twitter and other social media helping spark the Arab Spring. “It would be easiest of all to say that the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ are not war and so there are no lessons for us — military men — to learn,” he wrote. “But maybe the opposite is true.” There were new means through which to wage war that were “political, economic, informational,” and they could be applied “with the involvement of the protest potential of the population.” Russia’s military doctrine changed its definition of modern military conflict: “a complex use of military force, political, economic, informational and other means of nonmilitary character, applied with a large use of the population’s protest potential.”

Military officials in America and Europe have come to refer to this idea alternatively as the “Gerasimov doctrine” and “hybrid war,” which they accuse Russia of engaging in now. When I asked Peskov about those charges, he shrugged. Everyone was doing it, he said. “If you call what’s going on now a hybrid war, let it be hybrid war,” he said. “It doesn’t matter: It’s war.”

In the weeks after the 2016 election, the American political debate was overtaken by suspicions that Russia had played a role in the election in a significant way. There were the hacks of the D.N.C. servers, which intelligence agencies pinned on Russia well before Election Day. But there was also a sense that Russia’s media and social-media machinery had contributed to the informational chaos — the fake news and conspiracy theories that coursed through social-media feeds — that characterized the final stretch of the election, to, it turned out, Trump’s benefit.

In a handful of cases, picking through the tangles of information, true and otherwise, that shaped the election, it was possible to isolate a single strand that could be traced to Russian news sources. One of the most striking cases came in late July 2016, when Sputnik and RT reported that thousands of police officers had surrounded a NATO air base in Turkey amid rumors of a coup attempt — a report that turned out to be exaggerated (there was a planned, peaceful demonstration, and the police were there to secure the area in preparation for a visit the next day by the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff). Three internet-security analysts, now working together at the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund, followed the story's progress through the social-media landscape. Within the first 78 minutes, a large number of Twitter accounts — many of which they identified as pro-Russian bots — picked up the flawed story and blasted it out in some 4,000 tweets, one of the researchers, a former F.B.I. agent named Clinton Watts, testified before the Senate last spring.

Some of the accounts added the hashtag “#Benghazi” and warned that thousands of Muslims were on the brink of acquiring the nuclear weapons held at the NATO base. Others included “#TrumpPence16” hashtags, along with words like “America,” “Constitution” and “conservative.” Large numbers of the tweets included accusations that the “MSM” — mainstream media — wasn’t covering the attack. The RT story racked up thousands of shares on Reddit and was picked up on David Duke’s webpage. About two weeks later, in an interview with Jake Tapper of CNN, Trump’s campaign manager at the time, Paul Manafort, said: “You had the NATO base in Turkey being under attack by terrorists.” He claimed the media had ignored it. Watts told me: “That’s when we were like, ‘Whoa, this is a whole new level.’ ”

But such clear-cut instances were rare. In other cases, the network simply nudged along existing or nascent conspiracy theories: about Hillary Clinton’s health, about a Google plan to rig the election for her, about stock conspiracists’ obsessions like the Rothschild family, the Bilderberg Group and the Illuminati. In general, the social-media matrix is so opaque, with anyone able to set up an account under any persona, that “you can only crack a piece of it,” Watts’s colleague J.M. Berger told me.

After the D.N.C. staff member Seth Rich was, according to the police, murdered

in a botched robbery attempt on July 10, one of the first inklings of the conspiracy theory that continues to swirl around his death — that he might have been behind the leaked D.N.C. emails that WikiLeaks distributed that summer — was a video posted to YouTube on July 29 of the American RT host Lori Harfenist wondering aloud: “No one in the media is reporting that one of the D.N.C.’s employees who had ready access to the email servers was just mysteriously murdered in the middle of the night?” But far-right media outlets, and the Republican presidential nominee, had spent the election trafficking in baseless conspiracy theories, too. As Simonyan pointed out to me, “Fox raised similar questions” about Rich’s death.

And RT’s coverage of Trump had not been wholly uncritical. Chris Hedges, the former Times correspondent, said Trump had “a penchant for lying and deception and manipulation,” and Ed Schultz pleaded with his guests: “Who’s going to stop Donald Trump?” Even the declassified intelligence assessment seemed to struggle to describe what, exactly, made the Russian outlets’ influence on the election so nefarious. It described RT and Sputnik as sitting at the center of a sprawling social-media network that included “third-party intermediaries and paid social-media users, or ‘trolls.’” But it provided no detail about how that might have worked.

The best illustration I was able to find came from John Kelly, the founder and chief executive of a social-media marketing and analytics firm called Graphika. Kelly has been studying the movement of information online since 2007, when, as a communications graduate student at Columbia University, he became interested in the social dynamics of political blogs: the ways in which different sites found and related to one another and amplified one another’s work. He taught himself how to code and developed a program to quantify and map the flow of information within the blogosphere. That led to work on State Department-financed projects at the Berkman Klein Center of Harvard University, mapping the blog networks of Iran and, later, Russia. As the gravitational center of online conversation shifted from blogs to social-media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, he studied those too. Eventually he built a searchable database that captures millions of social-media interactions, stores them and analyzes them to determine social neighborhoods in which users share ideologies and interests, which he now mostly uses for private clients.

Shortly after the election, academic and corporate clients hired him to track the proliferation of “fake news” — that is, unequivocally false content. He confined his search to social accounts that shared fake news at least 10 times during the last month of the campaign. This September, in his airy, loft-style office suite on the West Side of Manhattan, he called up the results of the study on a laptop screen. They were visualized as a black sphere on which each of the 14,000 fake-news-spreading accounts appeared as a dot, grouped and color-coded according to ideological affiliation. The sphere was alive with bursts of purple (“U.S. Conservative”), green (“U.S. Far Left”), pink (“Pro-Russia/WikiLeaks”), orange (“International Right”) and blue (“Trump Core”).

Within the fake-news network, Kelly explained, RT was high on the list of most-followed accounts, but it was not the highest — it ranked No. 117 out of roughly 12,000 accounts he was tracking. Its website was the 12th-most-cited by the fake-news consumers and purveyors — ahead of The New York Times and The Washington Post but behind Breitbart and Infowars.

What was more interesting was who followed RT. It drew substantially from all quadrants of Kelly’s fake-news universe — Trump supporters and Bernie Sanders supporters, Occupy Wall Streeters and libertarians — which made it something of a rarity. “The Russians aren’t just pumping up the right wing in America,” Kelly said. “They’re also pumping up left-wing stuff — they’re basically trying to pump up the fringe at the expense of the middle.”

Nearly 20 percent of the fake-news-spreading accounts, Kelly’s analysis determined, were automated bot accounts, of the sort the American intelligence assessment claimed were working in tandem with RT and Sputnik. But who was operating them was unclear — and regardless, they were far outnumbered by accounts that appeared to belong to real human beings, reading and circulating content that appealed to them. In this paranoid, polarized and ill-informed subset of American news consumers, RT’s audience crossed all ideological boundaries.

In January, just a few days after the release of the declassified intelligence report, RT hosted a party in New York. The occasion was the United Nations’ decision to add RT to the internal television system in its Turtle Bay headquarters.

For nearly any other broadcaster, this would have been a minor achievement, but in Moscow, it was considered a coup and a rebuke of U.S. intelligence. There were 20 channels in the U.N. system, and as the network saw it, counting RT among them was a new testament to its influence: It was sharing a small dial with BBC World and CNN International, at the heart of the diplomatic world.

RT flew in several members of its leadership team from Moscow for a ceremony and held a cocktail party in the lobby of the General Assembly building, with hot plates and canapés of shrimp dumplings and meatballs and ham. Giant banners proclaimed “RT: Member Broadcaster of the United Nations In-House Network.”

After some mingling, the crowd moved into an auditorium with long pressboard tables and the standard-issue U.N. headsets and digital clocks. A number of officials gave speeches, including Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s ambassador to the U.N., who would die suddenly in the Russian Mission in New York the following month. (The cause of death was withheld according to diplomatic protocol, though the New York police told The Times they did not suspect foul play.) Alexey Nikolov, RT’s director general, also addressed the group. Nikolov is bald with a kindly face and a lilting voice. He began by explaining that he was reading from notes because he was emotional.

His speech was about his mother, who grew up under Stalin. She was orphaned at 3, “when she was thrown out of her apartment in the middle of Moscow winter together with her brother, when their parents were arrested by the N.K.V.D., the Stalin secret police,” he said, speaking haltingly. “My grandfather, her father, as she only found out many years later, was tortured and executed. And my grandmother, her mother, died in a labor camp. And similar stories happened to millions of my compatriots back in the 1930s.”

He was building toward something. “What I see today is more and more frequently people produce the highfalutin talk about using the word ‘propaganda’ that eerily echoes those dark days of the Soviet era, when even thinking their own thoughts, not to mention speaking or printing them, was a crime.” People, he declared, “must have the right to know different news, coming from different sources, and then make their own judgment.”

It was an addendum to “Question More.” Yes, question more, but also *consider* more — more news sources, more versions of reality. It’s a point that you really can’t argue with: Of course everyone should be open to other perspectives and different takes on the news. In large part, this is why outlets like RT and Sputnik have proved so vexing to the West — and especially so in the United States. The far-right media, and even the president, have embraced what a couple of years earlier might have been the fringe of political discourse. Their financing aside, how exactly do you draw a line between RT and Sputnik and, say, Sean Hannity, the Fox News host and confidant of the president of the United States, who has also trafficked in conspiracy theories about Seth Rich and mysterious illnesses possibly afflicting Hillary Clinton? Or Infowars, Alex Jones’s paranoid media empire, to which Trump gave an interview during the campaign?

It’s hard to imagine Russia’s state-backed media getting any traction in the United States if there wasn’t already an audience for it. For some subset of Americans, the intelligence report singling out RT and Sputnik was just another attack from the supposed “deep state” that Breitbart, for instance, had been fuming about for months — and it was less than surprising when, this spring, Sputnik hired a former Breitbart reporter, Lee Stranahan, to start a radio show in Washington. As Stranahan told *The Atlantic*, though his paycheck might now come from the Russians, “Nothing about it really affects my position on stuff that I’ve had for years now.”

When I asked Simonyan recently what she made of the proliferating attempts to map RT’s influence in the Russian information network that United States intelligence agencies describe as a hybrid-war machine, she replied by email: “These projects simply blacklist all reporting, including by American media, as some pro-Russian campaign if any facts or views in them don’t support the right kind of narrative.” At the moment, she said, that narrative was: “All world problems are Putin’s fault.” In her view, “it’s the sad history of McCarthyism repeating itself.” (These were arguments that echoed Trump’s own.)

It also reflected the genius of “Question More”: Every attempt to contain or counteract the Russian state-backed media’s influence simply validated it. Churkin, the ambassador, acknowledged as much at RT’s U.N. ceremony. As he stood to

speak, he seemed to be almost bouncing on the soles of his feet, delighted at RT's newfound prominence. "Everybody watches them," he said. "Diplomats do it, ambassadors do it, foreign ministers do it, heads of state and government do it." In an oblique allusion to the recent American intelligence report, he noted that some people had been criticizing the network, but perhaps this was not such a bad thing. Grinning, he said: "They sound as if they are P.R. representatives of RT."

Jim Rutenberg is The New York Times's media columnist and writer at large for the magazine. **Jaclyn Peiser** contributed reporting from New York and **Alexandra Odyanova** contributed reporting from Moscow.

Listen to Jim Rutenberg discuss how the Kremlin built one of the most powerful information weapons of the 21st century on "The Daily" podcast.

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